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## IMMORTALITY

HOWARD N. BROWN

I wish to begin what I have to say on this theme by frank acknowledgment that the idea of a future life often seems to me, as I suspect it has seemed to many reflective minds, all but unbelievable. It may be true, for all that, as many unbelievable things have turned out to be true. Indeed my present purpose is to argue as best I can that it is true. But I have to start with the recognition of a certain natural repugnance toward it, on the part of minds accustomed to look at things in the cold light of reason and common sense.

The case against it, as we are rather apt to look upon the life of the world, is almost conclusive; so strong that many now do not take the trouble to look much on the other side. So far as we can see, death is the total extinction of a human being. No hint comes to us at the moment of dissolution that anything survives the wreck of the physical frame. If there be a soul which escapes from that catastrophe unhurt, it is by some invisible way that wholly eludes our notice. To all appearance the life of a man is snuffed out, like a candle by the wind, and the lifeless body is left the sole remainder of what has been. When we try to think of the soul as a surviving entity, we almost inevitably ask where and how it continues to exist; and if we put these questions to our imagination, that faculty is apt to suffer total collapse. We are not accustomed to think of the air about us, or the ether above us as being peopled with invisible spirits; or, if we do endeavor to think that the souls of men "after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh" have the

freedom of these wide spaces, we do not easily conjecture what they should find to do there to make existence supportable.

Furthermore, though one may say with the Psalmist, "If God be for us who can be against us," we are quite apt now to make instinctive reference to Nature for an indication of the attitude of the universe toward us; and Nature appears to be absolutely indifferent whether we live or die. We are interlopers rather than otherwise, so far as her scheme of things is concerned. She does not take kindly to our improvements on what she has established. One is tempted to think, at times, that Nature would be willing to see the earth rid of our presence altogether, and there is not much suggestion that she would in any wise strain her resources to provide us more of existence than is here afforded us. On the whole, any healthful and honest mind is naturally disposed a good part of the time to be very much a skeptic with regard to a future life.

But there are several considerations that may properly induce us to distrust this unfavorable verdict. Some of our useful and matter-of-fact contrivances for utilizing the forces of Nature were absolutely incredible not so very long ago; and we are obliged to posit the existence in Nature of realities so strange to our experience that we have no language by which to describe them. When it is said of the ether of space, for example, that it is more solid than the most solid metal known to us, and yet so tenuous that planetary bodies move through it entirely without friction, there is an apparent contradiction of terms which it is very hard for reason to accept. Things may appear quite impossible to us, and yet we may be forced to acknowledge their validity.

It may occur to us also that whatever difficulty we have in making the idea of immortality seem probable and real, that difficulty has always existed for those who

were inclined to think seriously about the subject. It is perhaps somewhat harder for us than for men in other times to arrive at a positive conviction about the future life. But it never could have been easy for the more intelligent part of the world to reach hopeful assurance by a process of reasoning. And yet somehow men have believed; not the ignorant multitude only, but the philosophers. There must have been evidence not immediately apparent to the superficial sight, capable of making some weight against negative probabilities. I protest that when I consider what the fact of death appears to be in the common sight, and how people have always behaved in presence of that fact, the persistence of the belief in immortality seems to me to involve, in itself, a problem which current explanations are quite inadequate to solve. How did man, looking upon his dead, ever dare to form an expectation of a life to come? Why was not the thought of the soul's continued existence outfaced from the very first by sight of that which staggers our belief?

When we attempt to find the origin of religion in the mere crude theory of the savage or childish mind we ought to remember that, within the limits of our observation, a religion of pure theory never could be made to "go." I listen to explanations of the way in which primitive humanity was innocently led to ascribe the movement and growth of natural bodies to "spirits of the air," and I say to myself that after all this does not explain. There must have been some experience which supported this huge outgrowth and manifestation called religion in the early life of mankind. The men of those days must have found something better than mere conjecture with which to confront the great and ever-present fact of death. There is more to say of a probable basis in experience for the hope of immortality; though here I limit myself to affirming that it affords just pre-

text for deeper examination of the question than that on which our natural repugnance to it stands.

Above all, when we consider what the idea of an immortal life has stood for in the development of the higher moral qualities of our race, and what is likely to be the fortune and hazard of spiritual faculties when deprived of this alliance, we have motive enough for looking very carefully, and very far, before we yield altogether to that voice within us which says that the hope is most likely illusive.

We will not pause to elaborate this point; but I hold that nothing could well be more shallow than the sneer sometimes directed against those who will be good only for the lure and hire of heavenly bliss; and of all vain dreams, that of a wide-spread ethical culture which has given up religious hope seems to me, as the world now stands, one of the most baseless. That there are many people capable of making every sacrifice demanded by morality, though they believe that death ends all, one freely grants. But that the thought of a reckoning to come in another state of being has held a strong restraining influence over the vast majority of mankind, is scarcely to be called in question; and, knowing what men now are, I fancy no sensible person would like to see that influence withdrawn. Even when the moral life has reached a point where it can sustain itself temporarily without the help of such beliefs, it is still a question how long it will maintain its high enthusiasms and its peculiar valuations of conduct apart from religious idealism; and it is safe to say that very little worthy to bear the name of religion would long survive after the idea of immortality had perished.

Two great fundamental interests have always fed the religious aspirations and endeavors of men. One of these interests is that of securing help from unseen sources for the work and striving of our daily life here;

the other is the interest of seeing this life open into another and larger life to come. Of these two interests, I hold the latter to be by no means least. As human development is being shaped, I should say it might have to play quite the larger part in the religion of coming time. Certainly many of the ways in which religion formerly proposed to put man in alliance with spiritual powers for his worldly advantage are being gradually closed up. No longer in any civilized land do people much resort to their priests to ward off disease, or to secure a plenteous harvest. It is probable that in the more enlightened part of the Church of our day the thought of the hereafter is far more efficacious than the thought of immediate safety or prosperity by way of holding people to the religious customs of their fathers; though of course both interests may still be recognized. When we look the way the world is going and to the men and women who stand where the rest of mankind must slowly follow, it seems quite certain that religious discipline will be less valued as a means of securing advantage in the present race and warfare of life, and that the Church will have to live more and more on whatever assurance it can give of the reality of the idea of immortality.

Among the varied and conflicting opinions given as to the cause of weakness in religious institutions, and the prescriptions offered for building up their strength, it seems to me probable that their inability to convince the present world of the soul's immortality is at least a partial explanation of their failure to hold the attention of men; and that no device will enable them to recover their lost prestige till they can better answer the need of human nature at just this point.

We have much incentive, then, to look into this question to the uttermost, to treat it as a matter of supreme practical importance, and to let no small thing stand in

the way of such study of it as may bring to light every source of assured hope and reasonable probability. He who is aware of a certain skepticism in his mind with regard to the hereafter may well determine that this feeling shall not prevent most careful examination of every argument that can be presented in favor of the belief in a future life, or shut out any evidence that may possibly be found for its support. It is a question of such enormous moment and consequence that one can but lament the too common disposition of the educated mind at the present time to ignore it.

The main support of a reasonable belief in immortality is, I suppose, the apparent impossibility of constructing any rational scheme of existence without it. We are, to be sure, unable to prove that this is a rational universe; and some people appear to think that all things must be held in suspense until we can show the rationality of existence as a whole. But plainly all talk, of every kind, is vain and foolish unless we assume that we live in a rational world. We do assume that as a matter of course. If the assumption be nothing else, it is at least one of the necessary rules of the game, and we cannot play at all unless we hold to it. Thought itself is stricken with entire paralysis when it seriously entertains the supposition that the universe may not be built upon or proceed by any reasonable plan. If we are to continue to think about the world, we have to accept the hypothesis of its rationality.

But we cannot really see the world in a rational light without putting the thought of immortality into the general scheme of things. We can perhaps stop with saying that in some fashion unknown to us and entirely beyond our ken, the universe is able to justify itself as a reasonable creation. But since the whole effort of our minds is to find out what its reasonable order is, that unknown and undiscovered rationality of things is only

by some minute shade better than total irrationality. Objective existence is practically worthless, for our purposes, save as it presents itself to us in some reasonable aspect; and the world as a whole does not look reasonable, unless the human life that it contains is thought of as being prolonged into another state of being.

A world which goes through all the changes that this planet has experienced and expends all the energy that has here been put forth, with no resultant gain, is, in our sight, but a foolish kind of world; and nothing in its vast size as compared with our bulk, or its measureless antiquity as compared with our span of years, can shield it from that reproach. The stoutest faith imaginable in a supposed rationality of the whole of being can hardly support the plain folly and uselessness of such a long process of upbuilding, when the final end has nothing to show for the vast sum of effort expended. Our planet appears to be on its way toward the final extinction of its vital forces. If nowhere is any product of the huge machine being gathered and stored up, if in the end nothing is added to the sum of being by what has been here transacted, then life is not reasonable, as judged by any standard that we can apply to it.

Some attempt has been made to give it a reasonable appearance by supposing that as inferior orders of life have been forced to give way in part and yield to our control, so some superior kind of being will at last arise to put man under subjection to his rule. But this speculation does not amend the difficulty. In the first place, this superman would have to appear at once in overwhelming numbers, or we should probably kill him off in order to keep our headship of living things. In the next place, the speculation is of no use by way of helping us to the conception of a reasonable universe, unless we make the planet itself indestructible, and endow the superman, at least as a race, with earthly immortality.



The only possible way by which we can supply existence as we know it with a reasonable end is to carry our own life forward into another state of being. That gives to the life of the world a purpose, where otherwise no purpose can be discovered or imagined.

This, I should say, is the great argument in favor of immortality; and I am disposed to think that it has weighed more, all along, with the common mind than has the desire for continuance of life. It has been a good deal taken for granted that the wish was father to the belief; that men have wanted more life than this earth could afford them and therefore have formed the idea of another world to succeed this. No doubt such longing has played its part in building up the world's faith. But it appears to me rather easy to overestimate this factor of a composite result, and to ignore still stronger roots out of which the faith has grown. The desire for a future life is probably not so universal and not so strong as many seem to think. For one thing, the race has not imagination enough to dress the belief in any very attractive garb. The underworld of classic days must have presented rather a sad and dreary prospect to those who thought of it as a place of future abode; and the imagery which the Church has borrowed from the Book of Revelation has never made heaven seem so desirable that Christians were in any great hurry to get to it. To vast numbers of human beings life here has not been an exceedingly precious boon, and life hereafter has not extended to them a very welcome beckoning hand. On the whole, I doubt if the mere desire to have life prolonged has been as efficacious in producing faith as has been this other motive, to provide a reasonable view of existence and bring it within the compass of our understanding.

To be sure, man is, thus far, rather an emotional than a rational being. But he has rational instincts none the

less; and it is not required of the untrained mind that it should consciously think things out very far in order to sense a situation. It is so evidently the readiest way to provide the world with an intelligible meaning—to suppose that what we see here is the opening chapter of a drama to be completed elsewhere—as to warrant us in calling this inference one of the main supports of the common belief. Here, I think, has been with all classes of men a powerful answer to the natural skepticism of the common-sense view. There has been no getting away from it. Men have not had to grope after the idea that what they could see of life required some further unfolding for its explanation, but the idea has, so to speak, sought them and held them with a grasp they could not shake off. They could not choose but feel how inexplicable life was if the whole of it was under their eye, and their one resource was to push it forward for completion into an unseen world.

We have then, thus far, two strong impulses in human nature which tend to counteract each other. There is a certain tendency of the mind, looking upon the surface of things, to say, "This future cannot be. In sober truth, death for each one of us must be the end of all things." But there is something like an equal tendency of the rational part of our being to assert that it will not have the universe left a mere muddle upon its hands, and that the immortality of the soul is required to make sense out of existence.

One does not know how it would have fared with the idea of a future life if the matter had been left at the mercy of this opposition. But it has not been so left. We have spoken of some probable basis for this idea in the experience of our race. In our contemporary life there is a vast deal of what is assumed to be traffic with the unseen world; and one does not require to know much of history to be assured that, in all ages and from

the very first, that same traffic, or what passed for it, has been going on. Whether this experience was valid or fictitious, at all events vast numbers of human beings have believed it to be real; and that undoubtedly has had most to do with sustaining the idea of immortality. Spirits have been frequently seen, if we may credit what men in all times have said. Spirits have spoken, so that earthly ears could hear and understand; and this has been not mere vague rumor of something far off, but has been told on testimony that the uncritical mind at least knew not how to impeach.

Take, for example, the beginnings of our Christian faith. If anything was certain to the followers of Jesus during the first few years after his death it was that he had somehow risen from the dead. We can explain away what we please otherwise, but I do not see how their faith that he had been seen alive after his death on the cross is to be explained away. Not everybody, of course, credited the report of those witnesses who testified to this fact, but great numbers did; and it was out of this, in large measure, that the Christian religion got its start. Supernatural appearances, real or supposed, have been quite common in all lands. They are by no means rare at the present day; and it is this evidence of men's eyes and ears, however mistaken that evidence may have been, which has fed the world's belief.

One may doubt whether that belief, except as thus nourished, would ever have amounted to much among the possessions of the ordinary mind. Very probably it would have remained an uncertain speculation, hanging in suspense between positive and negative influences playing upon it, and never could have served as much inspiration or warning for men in their daily living. It has been some kind of experience with a life manifesting itself from the other side of the chasm of death, or what was taken so to be, that has given to faith in im-

mortality its most vital and quickening power. And this suggests the question whether we stand in any different case from the men who have gone before us; whether, in the absence of something that we can depend upon as real evidence of the life hereafter, belief in it is likely to have for people of our generation much more than a sort of academic interest. I am frank to express my own judgment that the idea is not likely to be of great consequence to the world of coming time, apart from some reinforcement of it by evidential means.

Most Christians, I suppose, if they believe at all, believe chiefly because they have not yet seriously doubted that Christ rose from the dead. But future generations are not likely to put so much dependence on that single incident. The idea must find a broader basis than that, in the experience of the race, in order to commend itself to people of scientific training and temper. This view of the case, that with us, as heretofore, something in the way of evidence is likely to be needed to put reality into the idea of a future life, lends considerable importance to a careful examination of what purports to be, in a measure, proof of the hereafter; to see whether or not it does contain anything on which the best reason can feel entitled to rely.

Yet that study, for some rather obscure reason, has found but little favor in the modern world. The Catholic Church undertakes to frown it down altogether; not on the ground that it is mere foolishness, but because the spirits with which one thus comes in contact are alleged to be wicked and depraved. One suspects that behind this objection there is an uneasy sense of insecurity about the Church's own hold on supernatural agencies, if they are brought under close critical study and review. For my part, I think I should not be so extremely particular about the moral character of spirits, if once I could be assured that they were spirits.

Orthodox science has poured much ridicule upon this undertaking, without adequate cause. It has chosen to take the position that the whole field to be investigated was nothing but a mass of preposterous illusions, and that only an untrustworthy intellect could think of finding there what was worth serious attention. But this judgment has been held without adequate information on the subject. It is an interesting field of study when one gets into it, whatever probable outcome the study may seem to have; and so many men of the highest eminence in science have now found in it the grounds of faith in a future life, that the charge of foolishness and irrelevance ought to be given up.

Having followed with some care, for quite a period of years, the literature of psychic research, I should like, in few words, to set forth my understanding of what its problem is, and to what extent it has made headway in dealing with that problem. The phenomena that it undertakes to investigate may be briefly described as follows: first of all, there is a mind in what is called a state of "trance," which appears to be more or less akin to the hypnotic sleep. This mind is having a vivid dream, and is automatically talking or writing out that dream. Most of the dream is of no more consequence, so far as we can tell, than any other deliverance of one talking in his sleep. But now and then there is injected into this trance or dream an element that assumes absorbing interest. This element takes the form of an attempt to reveal personal identity on the part of people no longer living here on earth. Names (or parts of names) are given, which these people bore while in the flesh. Features are described and incidents are recalled, apparently in the endeavor to give assurance that the person to whom these appertain is still living. The problem centres in the question where this element in the alleged communications comes from.

A great deal of the disfavor which psychic research has had to encounter results from misunderstanding of what it is that the study seeks to investigate. It is objected that the supposed spirits have but little to say that makes sense, and say this little very badly. George Washington comes and not only manifests no improvement in his spelling but positive deterioration of his grammar. But no one need pay any attention to all this. It is probably nothing but the dream of the subconscious mind. If there be any communication from the other side, one can see from the records now accessible that it is a matter of extreme difficulty, and that it comes only in fragmentary form. It seems most probable also that only to slight extent can this communication come in words. It comes mainly, if at all, in the form of mental pictures, which the dreaming mind describes.

When societies for psychic research first began to publish reports of their proceedings, these reports, so far as they contained anything suggestive, were commonly dismissed as stories of fraud. The so-called medium, it was said, got up her facts beforehand, and gave them out in an assumed trance as messages from the dead. But as time has gone on that accusation has disappeared so far as psychic research is concerned, and it has now, so far as I know, no respectable backing. To one who knows of the safeguards adopted it is simply ridiculous. Another favorite way of accounting for what was striking in these messages was to attribute them to chance coincidence. But that also has been dropped by those who have much knowledge of what it is that requires to be accounted for. A random guess might hit upon a true incident here and there; but when it comes to a connected series of incidents, substantially true to life, the theory of chance cannot be strained that far.

The matter is now reduced to a simple alternative—"spirits or telepathy." The information that sometimes comes through the dreaming mind is either drawn from the minds of living people by some sort of telepathic process, or it is impressed upon that mind from a source quite outside our earthly life. Many are saying, "Of course it is telepathy." Now while I am quite ready to grant that this latter hypothesis cannot be shut out, I am by no means willing to admit that it is "of course" true. Nobody will say that, I think, but the one who wants it to be true. The most ardent champion of the spiritistic hypothesis can hardly claim that a demonstration of the reality of a future life has been made out of anything that psychic research puts before us. That is to say, no evidence that it has gathered thus far can be surely depended upon to convince dispassionate but doubtful minds. People who were before entirely skeptical have been converted by this means, and people too of no mean order of intellect; but it will not convince everybody, as it ought to do if it were a real demonstration.

What may be reasonably claimed, as I conceive, is that the spiritistic hypothesis fits the facts to be explained rather better than does the telepathic hypothesis. To begin with, the appeal to telepathy is about as much an appeal to the unknown as is the appeal to spirits. How any subconscious mind can gain such access to another's store of memories as this theory requires; above all, how it can make so good selection from that store of what is pertinent to the occasion, is quite beyond explanation. Such powers far transcend any gift that we know of as being normally within the mind's possession. Furthermore, information is sometimes given of which it seems quite impossible to imagine that it was taken from the minds of living people anywhere adjacent. If it was procured by telepathy, it must have

been procured across some hundreds of miles of space, and from people whom the subconscious mind never heard of. Then the facts fit very well with the spiritistic explanation, because what is given would so naturally come from that source; that is to say, the main effort appears to be directed toward the establishment of personal identity, which, if the process of communication were in anywise difficult and uncertain, would naturally be the first consideration.

Objection is sometimes made that if anything comes from the other side, it should be statements about the manner of life in that other world. I do not think so. In the first place, if, as I suppose, the foundation of the process is the impression upon the subconscious mind of a set of mental images, very likely that mind would be totally unable to receive or make anything of a set of images quite unfamiliar to it. In the next place, granted a line of communication through which was known to be unstable and inadequate, would not the first impulse of an intelligence at the other end of that line be to say, "I am here, this is I; and you may know it by such and such tokens!" One may say that this talk of a set of pictures put into the dreaming mind from an extraneous source is altogether conjectural. That is of course true; but there are the facts, calling for an explanation of some kind. All I say is that in the present state of our knowledge, the spiritistic explanation seems to me on the whole most reasonable.

What, for example, are we going to do with ghost stories of which the world is full, and which demand attention, one may say, if human testimony is good for anything, anywhere? That a spirit becomes visible, clad in the habiliments of earth, is to me unbelievable. But that a telepathic hallucination may be strong enough in our minds so that we may seem to see objectively what is only a subjective image, I hold to be quite credible. The only



kind of telepathy we know anything about, however, is that in which there is a sending as well as a receiving agent; and where should that sending agent be if not in another world?

Psychic research, I should say, has established a probability, larger or smaller as it may be estimated by different minds, that some intelligible sign may come back to us, who wait our turn, from those who have entered the mysteries of the spiritual world. To many this probability, what there is of it, has already proven of immeasurable worth as a confirmation of their feeling that this ought to be somehow a reasonable world, and a reinforcement of their hope that broken links of friendship and affection may be again reunited. I know not why others also should not find this value in it, would they take the trouble to inform themselves of the grounds on which it rests. Should this probability increase with the further accumulation of evidence, as I myself have considerable expectation that it will, one can see here a possible strengthening of the whole basis of religious confidence, not to be despised. Not much, if anything, need be now looked for by way of added knowledge as to what life, in that other state of being, is like. The channel is too slender and too flickering to support with any degree of certainty such communications. At best, we are much like those who listen where miners have been imprisoned in their underground caves, and hear some signs which lead us to conclude that they are still alive.

But I wish to plead that this in itself is greatly worth while. That much good can come from indiscriminate experiments in untrained hands seems improbable. But if a body of men possessing the requisite scientific equipment were, after due investigation, to reinforce the opinions I have here expressed, it could not fail to exert vast influence. I think that the studies which psychic

research has begun ought to be taken up and carried forward by a goodly number of dispassionate minds. Many investigations are being pursued at great expense along lines that promise far less for the higher life of our race. Psychic research, in my judgment, has a case to command respect from those who will give it candid examination, and one that is not going to remain forever smothered by mere contempt.